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Empowering Our Ministry: The Spiritual Gift of Service

Acts 6:1-7

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As I have been saying for the past months, a spiritual gift is a special ability given by the Holy Spirit to those who have accepted Christ as their Savior and Lord. Spiritual gifts are given by the Spirit as the Spirit chooses, not as we choose. The Spirit gives these gifts so that the body of Christ, the church, might be equipped with all of the tools it needs to carry on the mission of the church, which is to glorify Jesus Christ and be effective in witness to Him.

This morning I want to highlight a spiritual gift called 'service', found in a list of spiritual gifts in Romans 12:7. You may recall that the gifts listed in Romans 12 are usually understood as 'functional' gifts. That is, they help the body of Christ, the church, function, because these Romans 12 gifts help us stay connected to each other. Sometimes these Romans 12 gifts are called 'adhesive gifts' for the same reason.

Now, the gift of service is the special ability that God gives to certain members of the body of Christ *to identify the unmet needs in a task related to God's work, and to make use of available resources to meet those needs and help accomplish the desired goals.* Service is the capacity to serve the physical needs of the body of Christ in a way that strengthens others spiritually. The Greek word is 'diakonos' from which we get our English word 'deacon.' That word is also sometimes translated as 'servant' and sometimes as 'minister.' The Greek word has its roots in a word meaning 'to run errands.'

The most familiar example of the spiritual gift of service emerges in Acts 6, read by the liturgist this morning. The context is that the main work of the leader disciples in the early church was teaching and evangelism. They taught God's Word to the growing church, since new converts had to be instructed in the ways of Jesus, and mature converts had to be moved along in their faith. Obviously, this was an incredibly time consuming task, since the church was growing very fast. But other leader disciples were spending a great deal of time sharing the Gospel with people who didn't yet know Jesus, and they also needed to spend time teaching those talented in evangelism how to better explain the claims of the Gospel.

The early church functioned much more communally that we tend to do today. They sought to take care of their own in terms of housing needs, and food, and medical care. They were involved with their community as well, seeking to be helpful and involved with local issues since they saw their role as bringing the light of God to all. So, there was a kind of safety net, a form of welfare, practiced by the early church. I would hurry to say, however, that there was no bureaucracy per se, that the leader disciples themselves looked into every situation of need, and organized the resources necessary to help. And (this is important!), the absolute assumption was that everyone worked who could work, so that no one was able to play the system and be an unproductive part of society. But some members of the church, and especially widows who were too old either to work or to remarry, needed the daily 'meals on wheels' to survive.

The location for all this was Jerusalem, and so many of the early converts to our faith were Jews. So, some began to see a pattern in the daily distribution of food and other resources, such that the Jewish Christians converts were being given preferential treatment over the Gentile Christian converts. Apparently, the pattern became so noticeable that it developed into a problem, which was brought directly to the leader disciples.

As you can read, their solution was to set some good boundaries. They realized that they were gifted to teach and to do evangelism, and that this was a crucial component of what the church was all about. But they also realized that a loving Spirit-led community took care of its own, and that the daily distribution of food and other resources was also a vital component of what the church was all about. They just realized that they couldn't do both well, and both needed to be done well. So they invited the church community in Jerusalem to pick from its own members, seven people to oversee the daily distribution of food and resources.

The character of the people was very important. They needed to be people who were full of the Spirit, that is, baptized or anointed or empowered by the Holy Spirit, people who were excited about their faith, people who had a deep commitment to Jesus and to His church. And they needed to be people who exhibited wisdom, the ability to make discerning, Spirit-led decisions. These seven became the church's first board of deacons.

It's important to note that the whole church nominated and elected these seven, the Jewish members and the Gentile members. Everyone participated in the nomination and election process. But all of those nominated bear Greek names. All of those who became the first board of deacons were, apparently, from the Gentile population of the early church, the same population that was being discriminated against. These seven were presented to the leader disciples, who publicly laid their hands upon them, and ordained them to this task of service. And the result? God's blessing continued upon the church, and more people turned their lives over to Jesus as the Christ.

We also see the spiritual gift of service in the carrying of material gifts for the needy to a church in need (2 Corinthians 8:16-24), and in the word Paul uses to commend Phoebe to the church at Rome (Romans 16:1-2) because she was a 'servant' of the church, and had been a great help to many people.

Also note the story of Mary and Martha in Luke 10:38-42, because it provides us with some words of caution about the spiritual gift of serving. Martha was very busy and also concerned about her sister Mary, who was not helping but sitting at the feet of Jesus. The story suggests the need to find balance between serving and worshipping. And those who are given the gift of service must not look down on those who do not.

Now, if you have your bulletin insert handy, I would like to mention eight character qualities and personality traits which I think are associated with someone to whom the Holy Spirit has given the spiritual gift of service:

(1) Has the ability to detect and meet the physical and practical needs of others

(2) Enjoys short-range goals; is frustrated with long-term projects

(3) Not usually a leader, may not be a good organizer, prefers to do tasks personally rather than let others help

(4) May appear to neglect own family while serving others

(5) Is easily hurt when not appreciated

(6) Has a lot of stamina

(7) Is often impatient with those who have other spiritual gifts, as in 'Let's quit talking about it, and do it!"

(8) Can easily get in a cheerful mood, especially when meeting the needs of others

The spiritual gift of service is an essential capability in our body of Christ, in our church. It's so incredibly important to have people who can 'see' unmet needs within the body, and move to meet those needs. As with all spiritual gifts, the person who discovers they have the gift, seeks to be in such personal communion with God that the person is listening all the time for the voice of the shepherd, waiting for the word from the Lord which directs the use of the spiritual gift. And, as also with all spiritual gifts, the person with the gift will begin to feel fulfilled and fruitful - you will know that this is how God has gifted you, and you will be effective as you exercise your gift.

The goal of the leadership of CPC is that everyone discover the spiritual gift or gift mix that has been provided to each one, and that together we develop these gifts, and use these gifts, so that we might become more joyful and competent in sharing the good news that Jesus Christ has come into our world, the great news that He offers real meaning to lives otherwise wounded and broken.

Think about whether *you* may have been given the spiritual gift of service. Talk to others about it. We have an inventory we can use (eventually) that may help you to discover your spiritual gift, but it's probably better to discuss it with fellow believers, and seek confirmation in relationship, in the context of the doing of ministry. If you discover that this is your gift, then develop it and use it, for the building up of our community of faith!

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